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MILLIONAIRES AND POETRY

MRS. MASTERMAN—not Mr.—
writes:

Millionaires might encourage literature. I am not quite sure whether they had better try. A taste in literature and a gift for making millions do not always combine. The form of literature that most readily starves its votaries in England is poetry. The number of poets compelled to give the best of their strength and power to something that feeds them, and only their fag-ends to the work that makes them immortal, is, perhaps, only to be equalled by the good poets ruined by amateurishness, the reluctance to have a professional standard and really work hard. I should like to endow a publishing house purely for poetry, all sorts of poetry, and give the author himself a hundred copies for his own. On the other hand, I should like to print poetry very cheaply, in three-penny or sixpenny copies. People would be readier to buy it on the chance of liking it.

We like “might” instead of “should” in the first sentence. And the half-truths in part of what follows appear amusing. There are not six poets in England, Ireland, Scotland, or Wales for whom immortality may be reckoned a sure or even likely thing; and not more than three of them happen to be unprovided for. The idea that a poet, relieved of the donkey work which feeds him, sings or ululates any the more bravely for his release is a mistaken one. As a rule, it is out of what seems to him agony, and what seems to dull men only the hurly-burly of life, that the poet gets his least perishable numbers. There is no poetry

that is not based somehow on misery. The appeal of poetry must always be from the hurt to the hurt. Our sweetest songs are those which tell of saddest thought. In a state of pure bliss poetry would not be read. As it is, we are permitted to sit and hear each other groan. “I groan melodiously: thou groonest immelodiously. Take thou my melodious groans and pay me for them. Perish the thought!—or rather the payment! Are we not companions in the like affliction and partners in the like disaster? Does a man bestow pence upon another man for weeping harmoniously with him at a funeral? Wherein, then, should it be profitable for me that my tears are a trifle more bloody or salty or pearly than the tears of the commonalty?” And as for giving only one’s “fag-ends to the work which makes one immortal,” if Mrs. Masterman promises not to spread the knowledge among Members of the Amalgamated Society of Employers who Put Up with Poets, we will tell her that your true son of the muses takes precious good care that the best of his strength and powers—usually a very poor best in any case—goes into the poetry, while the “fag-ends” are carefully reserved to the use and benefit of those persons who are accurséd every day of the week except pay-day, and are not over blesséd even then. No, my dear lady, you malign an entirely worthy and deserving body of mellifluous groaners and shedders of the briny. Doubtless you derive your views on this large subject from Mr. Masterman, who, as we understand, is a journal-

ist and not a poet, and consequently does really work for his money.

To take an instance: The other day, after a hearty meal of Madeira cake and home-made lemonade at an A.B.C. shop, a middle-aged but perfectly competent poet of our acquaintance wended his way reluctantly to somebody's office or counting-house, where he has the luck to be employed (God wot) on the remunerative and priest-like duty of writing everlasting figures in somebody's beautifully bound ledgers. *En route* to the resumption of this honest, soul-destroying toil—in Cheapside, as a matter of fact—the poet, replete with Madeira cake and lemonade, bumped right into one of the little muses (there are several score little muses, as well as the mighty Nine whose names so few people can repeat off-hand), and in a flash, as it were, she had imparted to him this line and a word:

“When I consider how the stars were made,
And——”

Then she was off (in another flash, as it were), and the poet had the thousand-and-first escape of his life from an untimely and horrible end at the instance of a motor-'bus. The driver of the 'bus used the customary very bad language indeed, but the poet knew that for himself he was once again on the track of some language which might be good, and he didn't care. So he continued poetically on his way to the office or counting-house, saying poetically in the back of his mind:

“When I consider how the stars were made,
And——”

Of course, he was aware that the little muse had cribbed the first half of the line out of Milton, but the other half and the ensuing “and” didn't seem to him to be cribbed, and the first half could be

altered if it were worth while; and, anyway, he felt inspired and—here was the office or counting-house.

“When I consider how the stars were made,
And——”

He hung up his hat on a peg which he hated—not the hanging up, but the peg—and shuffled to the high chair in front of the high mahogany desk which he also hated, and on which he had frequently proposed to carve with a penknife, “Oft was I weary when I toiled at thee” (as the galley-slave is said to have carved on the heavy oar), and all the time he was thinking about the line and a word, and wondering what he should put after the “and.”

And as he pulled down one of the beautifully bound ledgers from the brass rails over the desk, the man on the high chair next him gave him a nudge and said, “By Jove, So-and-So, I've just heard a dashed good little thing at the Bodega—a verse our chaps are singing as they go into the firing line. You're a bit of a poet [he has published six volumes, upon each of which the publishers claim to have made a trifling loss], but what do you think of this, eh?

“The old church bells ring ting-a-ling-a-ling,
For you and not for me—
Oh, Death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling,
Oh, Grave, thy victory?”

There's a bit of all-right for you, eh—what?”

For the time being the poet forgot to consider how the stars were made. Poets are always attracted by odds and ends and scraps of verse, no matter how foolish, and here was a morsel with all sorts of indescribable merit and interest about it. Our poet took it to his memory at the first repeating and chuckled over the humour and audacity of it, and specu-

lated as to who could have been hilarious or ironic enough to have composed it (only a soldier, he felt sure), and wished he had been a soldier and composed it himself. And then he went and told another man in the office about it, who said, to his surprise, that it seemed "ribald but profound"; and on the strength of "profound" his thoughts went back to the stars and himself to the high chair. By five o'clock, which was time to shut up the ledgers and get ready to go home—there is a fearful amount of preparation for every kind of action in offices—he had gone precisely thus far with the poem which he was sure he had to write:

"When I consider how the stars were made,
And whence the proud rose hath her vermeil
dye,
And——"

Always the "and," you will notice! On the tube, where he was in the habit of reading the evening papers, he reflected that he didn't quite like "vermeil," and that he must find a homelier word. Then he read some of the war news and dropped the paper; and when he alighted at his station the poem stood like this:

"When I consider how the stars were made,
And whence the proud rose hath her vermeil
dye,
And who [ter-um] hath [tum-ti] pavements laid,
And [tum] the golden banners of the sky.

Well, probably Mrs. Masterman and everybody else is growing weary of the fashioning of this poem, and anxious to come up with the millionaires; wherefore we will cut a long story short and say that the poet worked away right through the night on his rhymes, and in the morning at seven of the clock there was a finished poem of twelve stanzas, with a moving reference to the war and other tender things in it; and a jaded, tetchy, liverish, and worn-out poet, who was fain

to shog off to the weary round, the common task, with nothing inside him but a cup of strong tea and a nip of brandy, and who, though he sat all that morning in the familiar high chair and fiddled with the beautifully bound ledgers, could scarcely distinguish one figure from another for very tiredness.

Now, who received the best of the poet's strength and powers, and who the fag-ends? The poem appeared next day in one of the morning papers and was admired. It will appear in a forthcoming volume and be again admired. It had to be written, and it was written. But if the poet had gone to his employers on the afternoon of his seizure and said, "Behold, I am overcome with the afflatus; it were well that ye give me the rest of the day for myself, so that I may discharge my spirit softly of its burthen," his employers would have fallen down dead with amazement. And the worst of it is that if, perceiving his case, the employers had said to him, "You are caught by the glory; we excuse you for the day, and don't mind if you happen to be a bit late in the morning," the poet would doubtless have thanked them kindly and gone straight round to "the pictures" and never written the poem at all.

Then where should the millionaires come in? Frankly, we are of opinion that they ought forcibly to prevent themselves from coming in until it is established beyond doubt that the poet is surely crooked, scrapped, and past labour. The test is this: You take your poet, full of years and infirmities, and empty of his song, and prop him up against a convenient building in a busy thoroughfare. You place a dozen of English-made matches in his eager hand, and tell him to be of good heart and sell them. If he disposes of nine boxes in the course of

a fourteen-hours day, he is a poet and worthy of all he gets. If he disposes of fewer than nine he is work-shy, and should have saved money in his youth as you did.

To be serious, however: for poets or poetry, millionaires can do literally nothing which will advantage us. When you pension a young poet you have robbed posterity of quite the finest half, and probably more than half, of what he might have to say. All the young poets with unearned incomes either sing foul or are perennially out of song. Middle-aged poets, as everybody knows, are the devil. They have no figure, they will not come to dinner, they fall into black rages when you ask them if they have read "In Memoriam"; they tell you to your face that novelists, actors, comic singers, fiddlers, editors, and all the other performing persons upon whom you dote are asses, and when you ask them for a few words of criticism and encouragement in regard to the beautiful verses your daughter wrote for the programme of the Red Cross Sports and Fête, they say, "It is drivél." Nobody wants them, nobody loves them, and their sole delight is to rush into the first garden that comes handy and eat butterflies. The bare word "pension" drives them into the seventh heaven of fury; and if you make it "loans" they come too often, and write ten-thousand-line pasquinades about you at the first refusal. *Genus irritabile!*

The patriarchs of the tribe are, of course, few and far between. The fact that they have not died of inanition is strong presumptive evidence against the probability of their ever having been real poets. And supposing that they have been, and their works are there to show it, beware of them, for they are bores to a man. We have met several in our time. Years ago one of them got us in a

corner, produced an epic, and read it to us without a halt for refreshments for five solid hours. There was only a single good line in it—namely, this description of a London 'bus-driver—of course, of the pre-petrol sort:

He sat upon the knife-board cursing God!

What should millionaires want with poets, good, bad, or indifferent—adolescent, at the meridian, or doddering to the oft-rhymed grave? And, for the matter of that, what should poets want of millionaires? The answer is the same in each case. We once heard a rich man exclaim in his agony, when he heard that a poet-protégé of his was staying at the best hotel in a certain fashionable resort, "It is not the function of a poet to stay at the best hotels!" This we doubt; but we are distinctly of opinion that it is not the function of millionaires to pay the bill.

The fact is that the authentic poetry of the world can never be properly recognised till the poets who write it are snugly tucked away in the tomb. If a Shakespeare, or a Milton, or a Keats were to turn up in London to-morrow, he would have to go through the mills of penury, neglect, and contempt like the rest of us. He would stand no chance in the money line by the side of such ephemera as H. G. Wells, Conan Doyle, J. M. Barrie, and Arnold Bennett; the immortal author of "Bees in Amber" would be selling a hundred thousand copies, while unfashionable William or either of the Johns was "remaindered" or carted to the pulping establishments; criticism would be chary of him, and the paragraphists unswervingly dumb. This is nobody's fault and no reflection on a world which is slow in apprehension and the poetical up-take, and so accustomed to confound geese with swans, that when the swan comes along goose is believed to be the

proper name for it. And the very last person to complain will be the poet himself.

There is something to be said for Mrs. Masterman's dream of a publishing house "purely for poetry," though her generous proposal of a hundred author's copies, instead of the time-honoured seven or thirteen, will flick the proper poet somewhat gratuitously on the raw. One might just as well live in a house with a corpse as with a hundred copies of one's own, or anybody else's, poetical lucubrations. If Mrs. Masterman had suggested a hundred *pounds*, and printed it bold and lively, thus—£100—she would have made every fine frenzied eye in the country glisten with shining gratitude, and every child of Apollo, from Land's End to John o' Groats, might have risen and called her blessed. But whether a hundred copies or £100 were the standard award or emolument, is of small consequence. It seems to us that an endowed publishing house for poetry could be conducted only by poets, who, as a rule, are about as efficient in business as Prime Ministers, and even if the endowment ran into vast sums, comparatively little good, and in all likelihood much harm, would accrue. In a sort of way learning and science prosper under endowments, but poetry is an entirely different horse. For a reason which lies too deep for tears, pretty well everybody who can write with a pen imagines that he or she can write deathless verse, and the consideration which gives countless thousands pause is that there is "no money in it." To remove this heaven-imposed bar were to swamp

and ruin the legitimate interest. Far too many poetry books have been published of late. Regarded in their relation to letters (if, indeed, they have any such relation), ninety-nine per cent. of them are the sheerest rubbish and futility. It appears to be an unwritten law in certain sections of the critical Press that one must try to find good in them, and "let them down gently," even when the search is unavailing. We should like to wager that we have amongst us quite a thousand scatter-brained poetasters who can prove by print that they are geniuses of the first water. "Mr. Flittermouse is a true poet. He has the lyric gift and the meditative spirit. His lines, 'On seeing Phyllis with her Hair Down,' are the prettiest we have encountered for many a long day. We shall look for further charming work from this promising writer." How well one knows the formula, and what vanity and bunkum it is! And what confusion of the public mind and blunting of the public taste it must in the long result induce. Endowed poetry would mean simply endowed mediocrity, and mediocrity should not be endowed—excepting, perhaps, with ropes to hang itself.

If there be a millionaire in England who will give a silver sixpence for the glory of the Muse, by what method or process should he go about the noble work? We have known the poetry business through and through for twenty years, and we are free to confess that we are unable to offer a practicable suggestion. And anybody who tries is sure to come to a discomforting end.

From The Academy, London.